



MEMORANDUM

To: Washington Learns K-12 Advisory Committee

From: Lawrence O. Picus and Allan Odden

RE: Response to Peer Reviews of our Evidence Based Report
(Executive Summary)

Date: August 21, 2006

The purpose of this memo is to provide our initial response to the reviews of our Evidence Based report written by Eric Hanushek (2006) and James Smith (2006). The full response is attached.

The Evidence-Based report is just one of many documents we have prepared for Washington Learns. All of the materials we prepared support the findings and recommendations contained in the Evidence-Based document.

Smith and Hanushek's concerns fall into five broad categories, each of which is addressed below.

Evidence: Their first concern has to do with the research upon which we base our findings. We argue that the research we rely on is the best currently available in the field of education, and that we have carefully documented each study that we rely upon and explain how those findings were used to generate our recommendations (see pages 3-5 of the accompanying memo).

Linking the Recommendations to Improvements in Student Achievement: Smith and Hanushek claim we argue that if all the recommendations were implemented the effect would be the sum of the effect sizes and the expected improvement in student achievement would be far beyond what rational individuals might expect. We never intended the effect size data to be interpreted in such a manner and we made no claim that the effect sizes would be cumulative. The effect size data were provided to help readers understand the relative potential effects of alternative recommendations and to

help decision makers establish priorities for how to allocate scarce resources (see pages 5-6).

Efficiency: The reviewers contend that we have not addressed the issue of efficiency. In fact, our work addresses efficiency in two ways. First the model provides recommended strategies for providing educational services that will result in much more cost effective ways to improve student learning (see pages 6-7). Further, based on the results of the research we did in nine districts and 31 schools that have succeeded in improving student learning, we are confident that districts using the strategies we recommend will be able to reallocate current and new dollars to focus on research based strategies that improve learning (see pages 7-8 and pages 9-13).

Data and Accountability: Smith and Hanushek imply better data collection and stronger accountability, combined with “incentives for improved academic performance,” will *by themselves* lead to better schools. We disagree, and although not asked to identify an accountability system would have recommended one with incentives for schools that increased student performance and consequences for schools that did not. As asked, we did provide a structure for a new teacher compensation system that would provide increases in teacher pay on the basis of factors – instructional practice – that are linked to student learning gains, rather than factors that are not so linked (years of experience and non-focused education units and degrees). We also proposed bonuses for actually producing student learning gains. (See pages 8-9)

Randomized Experiments: The reviewers call for more randomized and controlled experiments before implementing our recommendations. We agree such studies are important. But when faced with the immediate goal of improving learning for all Washington students, combined with our field research findings that showed those schools that succeeded in making dramatic increase in student achievement had – on their own – implemented strategies nearly identical to our recommendations, we argue there is sufficient evidence to begin implementation of these strategies on a broad scale. This will benefit all Washington school children, and if monitored carefully in a system of strong accountability will, we believe focus any new resources that are available on strategies that research and practice show will work. (See pages 9-13)

The ambitious goals Washington has set for its public schools can be met, but it will very likely take more resources than the state currently provides. Based on our initial successful district analysis, no Washington district currently produces the level of performance desired, those few that meet goals set for the past and the upcoming school years all spend substantially above what the state now provides. How Washington wants to phase in new funding still needs to be determined through the political process. But we believe all of our studies and recommendations, of which the evidence-based model is the core, provide the state’s decision makers with the best possible information to help them take the next set of important steps to create a *world-class, learner-focused education system in order to compete globally and thrive locally*.